Synopsis for Submission of Thesis

"Indian Women Autobiographers of the Nationalist Period – A Gender Analysis"

RESEARCH GUIDE

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The deeply-felt need for a way of making the world intelligible to oneself has led scholars to explore diverse possibilities in understanding literature. The earlier tendency of literary critics to swear by the 'universal' and 'essential' nature of literature has now given way to an understanding of its discursive nature. The area of literary studies has thus been enriched by its foray into an interdisciplinary study of culture through fields like sociology, anthropology, history and many others. The current research study on the women autobiographers of the nationalist period traces the ways in which the self gets constructed narratorially in the intertwining discourses of patriarchy, nationalism, caste and missionary evangelism during the colonial period in Maharashtra. An effort has been made to explore how gender identities are sculpted in the genre of autobiography within the limits set upon women taking up the pen in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the ways in which they moved beyond these limitations.

The search for a 'female consciousness' in women's writings would mean the ways and the extent to which they manifest their awareness of themselves as agents with a sense of selfhood through introspection, reasoning, feelings and the ways in which they perceive themselves and relate to others. This female selfhood is traced in the autobiographical writings chosen for the current study in the context of the discourses of gender, nationalism, caste and evangelism that shaped their sensibilities. Feminist critics write that while men's autobiographies are accorded a positive value, those by women are devalued as merely spontaneous or natural outpourings of private selves and their concerns, lacking coherence and those vital aesthetic and transcendental qualities attributed to men's autobiographies. But now with the proliferation of theories of Postmodernism, Poststructuralism and Postcolonialism, a feminist study of women's

autobiographies has gained acceptance and has succeeded in bringing to the fore marginalised texts with incisive studies of the various discursive strands that influence this writing.

It is noteworthy that there were several factors that contributed to the proliferation of the genre of autobiographies in India. Modern techniques like the publishing industry, the burgeoning print media, the benefits of social reforms and education along with a nascent feeling of nationalism empowered Indians with the desire to inscribe themselves in literary writing including autobiographies. This need for social visibility implied a keener sense of selfhood and individuality through autobiographical writings which, in normal times, would be quickly frowned upon by the public as manifesting a patently western and highly 'egoistic' genre that was supposed to encourage 'self-glorification'. This would be totally out of tune with the more 'depersonalised', community-oriented life of Indians. It is also felt that notions of *karma* and *dharma* that govern Indians would not let the autobiographer see the self as being apart from a rootedness in familial, social and kinship identities. These identities are governed by the view of the world as one of *maya*, which therefore impels the individual to seek *moksha* through unquestioning acceptance of one's ascribed social role. However, the autobiographical writings of women even in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries prove that cultural mores of self-restraint could not contain their aspirations for self-expression and for social visibility. There is a need to eschew the definition of the contours of an autobiography by Western white male standards since it is perceived as primarily and almost solely governed by the possession of an autonomous and very strong sense of selfhood that resides in an individualistic personality. To apply a western, androcentric autobiographical yardstick is to deny the significance and rich complexity of women's autobiographical works in general and those by Indian women of the nationalist period in the context of this study.

What is interesting about these autobiographies is that many of these Maharashtrian women fashioned a selfhood by passing off their autobiographies as biographies of their husbands, as in the case of Ramabai Ranade and Lakshmibai Tilak, or by insisting that they were urged by others to record the changing and turbulent history of their nation, thereby offering immense lessons that the readers could learn from it, as in the case of Parvatibai Athavale. Deeper resentments of the gendered self were often couched by resorting to the use of humour to relate otherwise unpalatable aspects of their lives, as seen in the case of Lakshmibai Tilak. Most of them make use of 'coaxers' to register their selfhood in autobiographies. However, the radical step of fashioning the self for a larger public implied a wresting of the 'power of naming' that had been, till then, by and large a male prerogative.

In the present study, the contribution of scholars in the form of secondary sources has been of immense help. The incisive and astute analysis of Uma Chakravarti on Brahminism in nineteenth century Maharashtra, especially her study of the autobiographies of Parvatibai Athavale and Ramabai Ranade, the letters and autobiographical writings of Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, as also the essay by Muktabai has been of great use. However the current study is an attempt to read Athavale's 'Hindu Widow' not just as the expectedly conservative account of an upper-caste widow, but as a record of the ways in which conventional notions of widowhood get subtly subverted. Uma Chakravarti has given a brilliant analysis of the counter-narrative of widowhood in the autobiography of Ramabai Ranade. The present research therefore concentrates on this autobiography for the underlying ambivalences registered in the code of the *pativrata dharma*. Meera Kosambi too has contributed immensely towards the historical study of Maharashtrian women and their writings as in the case of Anandibai Joshi, Kashibai Kanitkar and Pandita Ramabai Saraswati. However, it is difficult to accept that in the case of most of the

Maharashtrian women autobiographers, there is no sense of definite agency or subjecthood. The present study suggests that the seeming lack of an overt subject position is more strategic than arising from any intrinsic sense of inferiority. Meenakshi Mukherjee too has studied the works of Krupabai Satthianadhan through the rich and complex strands woven by Sattianadhan in her writings. The current study focuses on the Christian dimension of her works in all its ideological ambiguities along with a similar impact perceived in the other autobiographers. The work of Gauri Vishwanathan and Antoinette Burton who have written on Pandita Ramabai has influenced the current research too. Susie Tharu and K Lalitha in their work on women writing in India have opened the doors for scholars to try and trace a literary consciousness among women over the ages. Despite rumblings of criticism against the writings of Partha Chatterjee, his seminal analysis of cultural nationalism and the 'resolution' of the Woman's Question remain significant for the study of autobiographies. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid have also left their lasting impact on the study of 'multiple patriarchies' and the ways in which the New Woman was 'recast' during the reform movement. Rosalind O'Hanlon's pioneering work on Jotirao Phule and the challenge thrown to the upper castes has great bearing on the present study. The anthropological work of Leela Dube, the writings of Jashodara Bagchi, Tanika Sarkar, Sumit Sarkar, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Charu Gupta, Nicholas Dirks, Robert Frykenberg and many others have also shaped this study of women's autobiographies considerably.

A careful analysis of women's literature, both oral and written, reveals that women autobiographers in India did have a female tradition of selfhood to draw from as a model even if it was a rather tenuous one. The cultural ethos of the worlds they inhabited was also suffused with a repertoire of practices that would have helped them carve their selfhood, apart from the *Bhakti* model. Women's voices right from the time of the Buddhist nuns or *Theris* in the sixth

century B.C. reveal the ways in which they strain against oppressive limitations set on their selfhood. Critics have rightly observed that the 'recasting' of the New Woman in the mould of the Aryan woman, bound upper-caste women even more securely into traditional roles set out for them along with the modern expectations of Victorian bourgeois schooling in hygiene, child-care and thrift. The ideals of docility and chastity in the *pativrata dharma* and the image of the self-sacrificing mother get entrenched even further. The efforts of the colonial regime to legitimise its imperial and commercial ventures by trying to 'civilise' the barbaric natives included an agenda to rescue native women from degrading practices like Sati, child marriage, and *Kulin* polygamy while also working for women's education and lifting of the ban on widow remarriage. This rhetoric about the wretchedness of Indian women reveals the lop-sided view of womanhood taken up by both the colonial regime and the native elite reformers. The exclusion of the Muslim and lower caste women from their reforming agenda, is also striking.

The purpose of this study is to analyse from a feminist perspective, autobiographical writings of Krupabai Satthianadan, Cornelia Sorabjee, Parvatibai Athavale, Lakshmibai Tilak, Pandita Ramabai Sarawasti, Ramabai Ranade, Savitribai Phule, Yashodabai Joshi and other women who wrote during the period of cultural nationalism, in order to see how the ideologies of caste, patriarchy, evangelism and nationalism inform these works, and also either sustain or contest each other. A multi-disciplinary approach has been used in the present research. The scope of the study is articulated in some of the questions explored here. How did the 'reformed' women simultaneously collude with and resist the reformist agenda scripted for them? To what extent and in what ways did they 'perform' the normative feminine role expected of them in the new circumstances? Did they encode subtle 'palimpsestic' and 'subterranean' selves within the recuperative readings of their texts? How do their writings reveal the tensions, conflicts and

ambiguities within the liminal positions they occupied in the nationalist/colonialist, missionary, caste and patriarchal discourses of the times? The current study tries to see the ways in which multiple and shifting identities were interwoven in the autobiographical writings. An attempt has also been made to see the ways in which these identities were inflected by the new models of companionate marriage, the rhetoric around the figure of the widow, the caste-contestations that churned their surroundings and most importantly, the impact of Christianity that overtly or insidiously shaped their female consciousness. This close study therefore includes a thematic analysis of the dominant ideological influences in their writings from a largely feminist perspective as well as the ways in which these women construct and get constructed within the domain of language. Other autobiographies that were written during this period, especially by Bengali women, have been excluded from this study because a lot of work has been done on the area by other scholars. Also, the tenacity of caste was not as rigidly felt in other regions as it was in the erstwhile Peshwa-dominated regions of what we now call Maharashtra. Besides this, the formation of selfhood in the case of Muslim women has also been excluded owing to the dearth of sufficient primary source material in the form of autobiographical writings in nineteenth century Maharashtra. The current study is primarily a thematic study of autobiographies largely from women's perspective and excludes the larger dynamics of gender that would incorporate notions of masculinity, femininity as also transgender and what is called the third gender.

The structure of this study is as follows:

The first chapter deals with the genre of autobiography, its western origins, the features and aspects usually associated with it, questions related to gender and genre and its indigenous modifications by women under socio-cultural compulsions seen in the plurality of selves

inscribed by them. It also includes a general historical and cultural perspective of gender and nationalism in India especially during the reform period and the period of cultural nationalism in colonial India. The second chapter explores the issue of domesticity, companionate marriages, and 'schooling' of the 'reformed' wife that occupied centre-stage in nationalist discourse, influenced by missionary and colonialist rhetoric about the 'woman's question'. Here, an attempt has been made to trace the ways in which these modern wives were 'recast' within the companionate marriage with a close reading of the autobiography of Ramabai Ranade. A close study of this text has also been made for quests of autonomy, incipient feminist consciousness and unacknowledged stirrings of revolt and resentment even within an overtly subordinate relationship with the husband/god. The third chapter traces in part with the material, literary and discursive representation of widowhood, and analyses the personal experience of widowhood as reflected in the autobiographies of reformed women, with a close study of the autobiography of Parvatibai Athavale in particular. Here, the endeavour has been to see how she subverts many of the limits of widowhood and aspires towards a better growth of her personality. The fourth chapter gives a historical perspective of the category of caste and its significance in shaping the consciousness of women especially from the lower castes. The letters, essays and poems of Savitribai Phule and Muktabai have been explored from the perspective of caste and the formation of their identity has been compared with the caste-consciousness articulated in contemporary upper-caste women's narratives. At the risk of essentialising and stereotyping caste identity, it must be conceded that for marginalised groups, the community identity often matters more than notions of unique and individualistic selfhood or even womanhood as can be seen in the writings of Muktabai and Savitribai. The fifth chapter is an analysis of the impact of Christianity on selfhood seen in the autobiographical writings of 'reformed' women from the

upper caste and the converts to Christianity, as also of women from the lower castes. The intensification of missionary work and its rhetoric in the nineteenth century imbricates Christianity as a discourse and as a religion in the ideology of colonialism and nationalism. A specifically Christian way of life seen in institutions and organisations permeated the lives of native women and even coincided with some indigenous practices that dovetailed with Victorian notions of Christian femininity. This chapter traces the socio-cultural ambiguities, tensions and conflicts brought about by this new dispensation as constructed in the consciousness of 'reformed' women of the period. The concluding chapter draws together all the strands of thought in the preceding chapters to highlight the over-all impact of these influences in the formation of the consciousness of these women autobiographers.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveal the formation of a distinct female consciousness of selfhood as expressed in the remarkable number of autobiographical works by women in Maharashtra. The growth of nationalism was an important factor in this crystallisation of women's identity through autobiographies in colonial India. The present study has shown that many of the Maharashtrian women autobiographers were proto-feminists who were certainly aware of their subordination and at least sought subtle ways of critiquing it, apart from the active role they played in supporting each other and other women through various women's associations. Albeit in different degrees, they manifest a growing awareness of their lot as women. However, not all of them are able to articulate a significant challenge to gender oppression to the same extent as others among them did. Nevertheless, they cannot simply be dismissed as conservative and passive, or lacking in a will of their own. In the case of Brahmin women living in and around the Pune-based citadel of Brahmin orthodoxy, despite the changes offered by reform, women still bore the brunt of repressive ideologies so that the class and caste

exclusivity of the hegemonic Brahmins could be jealously guarded. As has been analysed in the study, the very real challenge posed to the Brahmin monopoly in social, political and educational spheres by the aspiring lower castes had to be ruthlessly quelled by imposing even more rigid restrictions on Brahmin women. The upward mobility of the lower castes seen in efforts to sanskritise themselves through imposition of similar curbs on low caste women too were often resented and resisted by the Brahmins who feared loss of exclusivity and flaunted the rigid disciplining of the sexuality of their women.

The autobiographical writings of 'reformed' women reveal the ways in which 'reconstitution of patriarchies' took place in Brahmin-dominated Maharashtra in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They show the ways in which socialization of the girl child took place in a profoundly gendered society. They show how female bonding helped in the formation of their female selfhood. They reveal the repressive aspects of nationalist ideology in their writings - aspects that made tremendous demands on them as child brides, companionate wives and celibate widows. Their autobiographical writings reveal the ways in which they enacted or performed their multiple roles that created fissures in their consciousness but which could not curb their incipient feminism. They register 'polyphonic' voices and multiplicity of selves in their writings that enrich their work owing to the contradictions, tensions and ambiguities that were inevitably a part of the fashioning of reformed women straddling the public and private domains. Keeping in view the general disfavour for this genre, women manipulated the form and content of their personal narratives by indigenising them to incorporate the 'other' – the nation, community, or spouse, and project their 'relational' identities rather than the individual self. In fact, nationalism becomes an excellent reason often used by women to impinge themselves on the nation's consciousness. But these 'relational' and

'community-centred' narratives represent only one aspect of their writing that cannot be read in isolation. The multiple and shifting positions occupied by the narrating self can also be seen as contingent and performative devices that simultaneously encode a complex selfhood emerging from their struggles with contesting discourses. .

The need to bring into the public and political domain, writings on women that have now resurfaced after almost a century of being consigned to silence in the pages of history and literature is indeed a pressing one. This is especially so in the light of the stridency of cultural nationalists who under the pretext of 'hurt sentiments' at best sanitise and at worst censor and efface disturbing literary and historical writings out of college and school curricula in highly political acts of erasure. The study of women's writings, even if from other times therefore needs to be kept up, particularly in light of the disconcerting ways in which history repeats itself in the restrictions and curbs placed on the lives of women in the name of protecting native 'culture'. A study of marginal, 'subaltern' voices therefore has emancipatory possibilities for, the ultimate aim of all would be to move towards a more humane world with space for all to develop their potential as human beings.

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